

Rural Tourism Marketing

Chapter Nine – Discover Your Niche

Today more than ever before, savvy tourism marketers are reaching out to non-traditional tourist populations and activities in an effort to reach new visitors. And they're taking a new look at their community's assets while thinking about niche travel markets that might find them especially appealing.

Travelers of a specific ethnic background, gay or alternate lifestyle travelers and those with specific interests can often breathe new life into a destination. Much of the revitalization of Palm Springs as a visitor destination can be credited to the gay travel community. California's State Parks are marketing their historical events and attractions to an ever-broadening audience. And Hispanic travelers, from both within and outside of the U.S. are visiting California in ever-increasing numbers.

Is there a niche traveler just waiting to visit your area?

The Gay Traveler

Palm Springs has nearly thirty hotels that cater to gay men or women, with more opening every year. Business people in Palm Springs and other California resort destinations are discovering that gay travelers are affluent, love to travel and will return again and again to a destination where they feel welcome.

According to a study conducted by a major gay travel organization, 85% of gay adults in the United States took at least one vacation in the past year, compared with a national average of 65% for all adults. Nearly 37% of American gays took three or more vacations in a year. The IGLTA attributes this impressive statistic to higher discretionary income of the gay and lesbian community, fueled by the fact that about 50% of gays are "dual income/no kids" households. The association says that with fewer annual expenses such as college tuition, child-rearing etc., gay couples have more money left over at the end of the year for vacations.

Here are some other impressive statistics on gay travel:

- 45% of gays and lesbians took international vacations, compared with the national average of 9%.
- 81% spent five or more nights in a hotel.
- 75% have household incomes above the national average (\$40,000); with 23% having household incomes above \$100,000.
- 11% budget \$3,000 or more per vacation.

Is Your Community “Gay Friendly”?

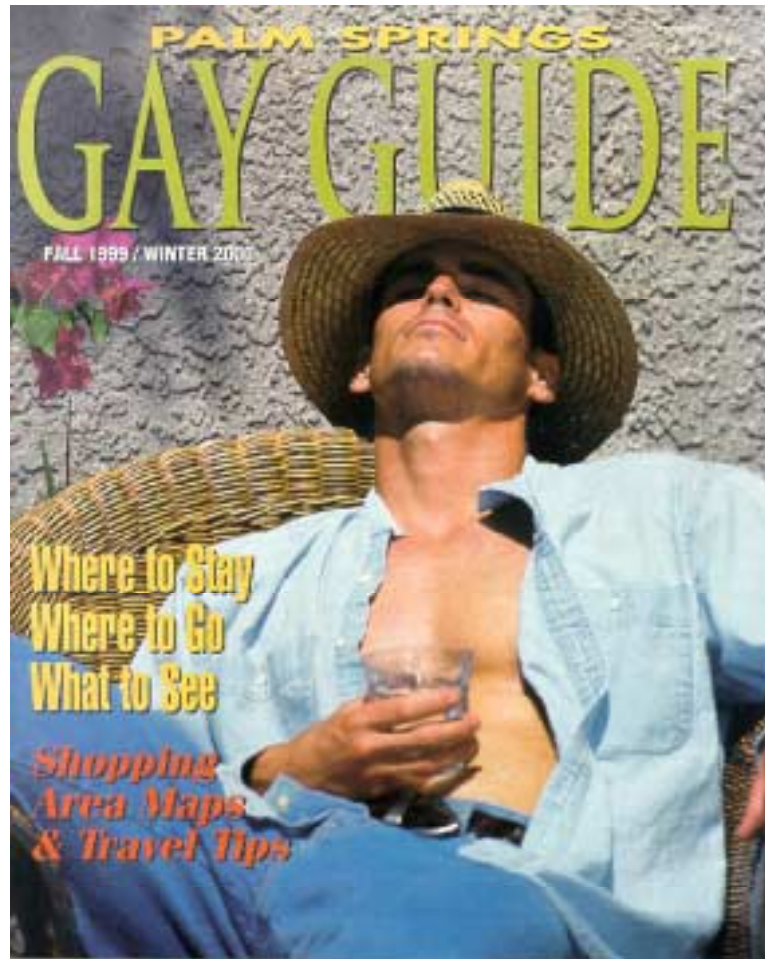
Clearly, this is a lucrative market. But the IGLTA cautions that targeting this market must be done with “due sensitivity, care and consideration,” adding that “although there may be more discretionary income the fact remains that gay travelers shop for value.”

In fact, because gays are frequent travelers, new destinations or experiences are especially appealing.

However, before you specifically invite gay vacationers to your community, the IGLTA

suggests making sure that accommodations, ground handlers, tour guides, etc. in your destination are truly “gay friendly.” Are you aware of popular restaurants and bars or nightclubs that cater to a gay clientele? Could you organize a reception that brings together providers of travel services to this target market in your area in order to facilitate an increased marketing effort?

If you offer a well researched and favorable experience, says the IGLTA, then your destination will benefit from word of mouth and continued growth in this lucrative market.



Helpful Hint: *Gay travelers are twice as likely to purchase their vacation using a travel agent, often one who specializes in that market. Smart destination marketers will want to research and target these travel agencies if pursuing the gay visitor.*



Cultural & Heritage Tourism

When you think of a vacation, you may perhaps first picture the image of simply relaxing on a beach or strolling through a quiet forest. And certainly, for many travelers those are alluring images.

But more and more travelers are deciding that a little intellectual stimulation along with the requisite periods of doing absolutely nothing makes for a more balanced, and therefore more enjoyable trip.

When people decide that they want to travel to learn; to explore the intellectual or artistic aspects of an area...they have become what we now call “cultural tourists.” While this may not be a new phenomenon, the growing recognition of its value in the hierarchy of tourism promotion certainly is.



According to Robert Barrett, Vice President of Domestic Marketing for the Los Angeles Convention & Visitors Bureau, one of the leading factors in the travel decision in the 21st century will be the ability of a destination to “imaginatively articulate their cultural attractions to potential visitors worldwide.” Barrett says that while no single destination can corner the market on snow capped mountains or beaches, destinations can set themselves apart from the competition by discovering what truly makes them unique in the competitive marketplace.

Often that uniqueness comes in the form of a fascinating history, displayed in a museum or art gallery. Or perhaps it lies in the Native American culture, the early railroad or stage lines, or a modern ballet company or theater troop.

According to the paper Cultural/Heritage Tourism – Searching for the Real Experience (available at www.visitcalifornia.com/research), heritage tourism embraces the ethnicity of California, whether it be Native American, Hispanic-American or the myriad other ethnic backgrounds that shape our state. A visit to Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles or Chinatown in San Francisco is certainly a cultural heritage experience. But so too is a trip to the mission at San Luis Obispo or a tribal museum in the California desert.

The Travel Industry Association of America reports that nearly 30 percent of Americans included a visit to a museum or historical location on their last vacation and nearly 20 percent attended a cultural event or festival.

Overseas travelers make a particularly attractive target audience for cultural and heritage tourism activities. Of the nearly three million international travelers to visit California on vacation in 1998, more than 45% visited historical places, nearly 30% saw a cultural heritage site, one out of five went to an art gallery or museum and almost 10 percent visited an American Indian community.¹



Have you met with your local historical society to determine what they might be able to offer visitors? Have you learned what cultural activities visitors to your area might enjoy while they are there? If not, perhaps some of the advantages of your destination are being overlooked.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation publication Getting Started: How to Succeed in Heritage Tourism suggests the following when searching for heritage tourism activities:

1. Focus on authenticity and quality.
2. Preserve and protect resources
3. Make sites come alive
4. Find the fit between your community and tourism

One of the most significant markets for your destination, and for cultural tourism opportunities specifically are “baby-boomers” born between 1946 and 1964. This group has more disposable income, and travels more frequently than any generation before or since. Recent studies also indicate that they are the *most likely* to travel for cultural or historical reasons.

“One of the most successful ways to capitalize on a community’s assets is to form strategic alliances between the visitor industry and the cultural community. Such an alliance plays a crucial role in determining the image--and, ultimately, the reality--of a place’s character. The relationship between culture and tourism is more than symbiotic: it is defining. A community’s capacity to stimulate and sustain active artistic expression paints a distinctive and desirable picture. Communicating the arts is a powerful anecdote to the common clichés that characterize the challenges of modern urban life.” **Robert Barrett, LACVB**

¹ Cultural/Heritage Tourism – Searching for the Real Experience

Watchable Wildlife

We'll bet you never considered "bug watching" to be a pastime for adventurous tourists! Did you know that "bat watching" was taking off across the country? Those are two of the more unusual examples of another tourism niche called "watchable wildlife."

From wave-battered headlands and quiet estuaries to spectacular mountain peaks and sprawling desert plateaus, California's world-famous scenery is a haven for wildlife, reports the California Department of Fish and Game. The DFG adds that the diversity of habitats and wildlife species here are the greatest in the United States.

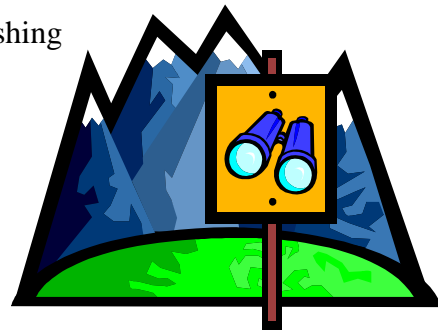
The DFG's website reports that California's 101 million acres include 1,100 miles of coastline, 37,000 miles of streams, and more than 5,000 lakes. Habitats range from 14,495-foot Mt. Whitney, the tallest peak in the lower forty-eight states, to Death Valley's Badwater, the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere at 282 feet below sea level. The variety of wildlife is stunning, from feather-light monarch butterflies to two-ton northern elephant seals, from slow-moving desert tortoises to peregrine falcons that fly at speeds of 160 miles an hour.

California's wildlife viewing opportunities exist because outstanding natural areas have been purchased and set aside for a variety of recreational uses. The DFG reports that for many years, state and federal wildlife land acquisitions were funded almost entirely by sportsmen through license fees and taxes on hunting and fishing equipment. These refuges, wildlife management areas, preserves, preservation programs and habitat enhancement activities clearly benefit non-game species as well.

Today, the threats to wildlife habitats have become so acute that fewer and fewer people are involved in hunting. At the same time, wildlife-viewing activities have increased significantly.

The California Watchable Wildlife Program is quite interested in working closely with California's rural tourism destinations to help you maximize your area's wildlife viewing opportunities.

Contact the State of California, Department of Fish & Game, 1416 9th Street, Sacramento, Ca 95814, call (916) 653-5420, or look up their website at www.dfg.ca.gov.



The Hispanic Market

If it's a growth market you're looking for, then you should certainly explore the exploding Hispanic travel market.

The Hispanic population in California is growing by approximately 300,000 per year. In 1990, Hispanics constituted 26 percent of the California population, with that percentage growing to approximately 30 percent of the population in the year 2000. By the year 2030, Hispanics are projected to be the majority of California residents. Right now, there are four million Hispanics, primarily Mexican-Americans, in the Los Angeles metropolitan area alone. Two-thirds of American Hispanics were born in the United States.

Although this is still viewed as an emerging travel market, it doesn't take a statistical or marketing genius to figure out that those who make early attempts to draw the Hispanic traveler will reap the rewards in the future.

According to a major study of the Hispanic travel market, Hispanics traveling for pleasure tend to be a bit older than the average traveling family. The average age of the head of the *traveling* Hispanic household (those who reported taking more than one trip a year) was 41, compared with an age of 31 years for the traveling Caucasian household.

There are also more people in the average traveling Hispanic family, with 21 percent having five or more members. Travel parties with children are more common among Hispanics than with any other traveling group.

A major tour operator's association reports the following in its recent study of the Hispanic travel market:

- Hispanics tend to maintain Spanish as their first language.
- 80-90% of Hispanics are Roman Catholic.
- 7 out of 10 nationwide view themselves as Hispanic first and American second.
- Hispanics are extremely brand loyal and spend more on national brands than the general population.
- Major purchasing decisions tend to be made by the man of the household.
- Hispanics are very family oriented.
- There is strong geographic clustering of Hispanics.

So how do you reach the growing Hispanic travel market?

Experts suggest that marketing emphasis needs to be placed on attracting *first time* Hispanic visitors. Considering the loyalty of the Hispanic consumer, the consensus is that those destinations able to attract Hispanics and provide a satisfactory visitor experience will

reap the rewards of this inherently loyal market. The challenge lies in making the initial contact and sale. Here are some tips:

- Emphasize family atmosphere in ads and promotions targeting this market.
- Realize that Spanish remains the language of choice among a great percentage of Hispanic families.
- The most effective way to market to Hispanics, according to the NTA, is to link advertising with in-community promotional efforts such as special events, etc.
- Hispanics respond most highly of all groups to direct mail coupons.
- Hispanics are broadcast oriented, but favor Spanish language media.
- Market in good taste, and avoid possibly offensive clichés such as sombreros, maracas, etc.

Since the average age of the Hispanic in California is only 22, there is no doubt that as these young people mature, marry and raise families their addition to the California travel market will have a most significant impact.